

Unit 5: Gestures and Taboos

Objectives

At the end of this unit, you will

Be aware of the following

- Importance of gesture/taboo knowledge for Serbian and Croatian linguists
- Helpful cross-cultural perspectives possessed by military personnel
- Necessity of personal restraint and effort to become culturally adept
- Universal cultural message of the smile
- Foundational attitudes helpful in dealing with Central/South Central Europe peoples
- Greetings, gestures, and eating “dos and taboos”
- Cautions military linguists should employ

Identify

- Ultimate gesture
- Polarized thinking
- Balkan Ghosts
- Black Lamb and Grey Falcon

Realize

- Importance of humility, sincerity and restraint when working cross-culturally
- Overarching impact of history within the SCE region
- Importance of family and friends in SCE society
- Distinct religious practice--Catholic, Orthodox, Muslim--in the SCE region
- Necessity of observation, civility and respect in Stabilization Force missions
- Importance of language, friends and family in SCE

Unit 5: Gestures and Taboos

"You need to carefully orient your forces so that you don't end up being your own worst enemy simply out of cultural ignorance. Many times Russian soldiers made serious cultural errors in dealing with the Chechen civilians. Once insulted or mistreated, they became active fighters or supported the active fighters. Russians admit they underestimated the affect of religion on the conflict."

-- Russian Army Lessons Learned from the Battle of Grozny, COL Henry A. Zimon, ODCSOPS



Manners, morals, customs and taboos--it is impossible to know all the elaborate and complex rules which govern interactions within a given society or culture. The task overwhelms.

The purpose here is not to rephrase guidance given in manners and customs texts. Rather, this section first outlines general perspectives military personnel can take in approaching a new culture. Then it treats common attitudes, greetings, gestures, eating practices and cautions to employ when dealing with SCE peoples.

I. General Perspectives

1. Confidence As members of the United States Armed Forces, we maintain a sensitivity to culture whenever we put on our uniforms.

Higher ranking officers receive salutes, a sign of respect due to their rank. Noncommissioned officers exert hands on guidance and supervision. The titles, sergeant and petty officer suggest a different--though no less important--type of respect. These courtesies recognize varied cultures within the military.



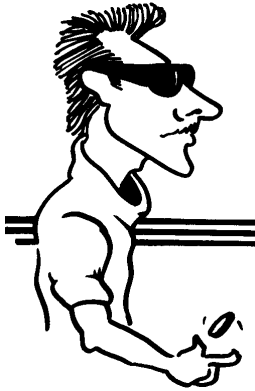
Applied to dealing with peoples of other lands and societies, these same habits and respect for authority become invaluable.

Desert Storm/Shield/Farewell authenticated the sensitive and knowledgeable cross-cultural abilities possessed by our armed forces personnel. More than 560,000 American service members deployed to the theater. Customs and traditions of Saudi Arabia were drastically different than those of the United States.

Yet what happened during the deployment? Writes logistician Lt. Gen Pagonis in his account of the conflict, "Nothing.

There was not a single incident of deliberate misconduct on the part of our service members...our soldiers showed great understanding and compassion...[They] demonstrated that they were smart, and talented, and flexible." (Moving Mountains, p. 228.)

The Gulf conflict demonstrated the certainty that, when put to the test, training prepares airmen, soldiers, sailors and marines to deal with sensitivities of other cultures.



2. Restraint T.E. Lawrence, British adventurer, writer and Arabist of the early 20th century, described this sense of tempered behavior. "Keep always on your guard," wrote Lawrence, "...be a little stiff at first."

We may feel the best way to get along is to imitate, in some ways, the conduct of SCE peoples in order to be accepted. The safest course of action is often to imitate. The best approach however, is to restrain our impulsive, up front, forthright, let-it-all-hang-out behaviors.

Treating individuals as if they were entering our living rooms--by dispensing courtesy and grace--goes a long way to cement solid relations with others. Possessing a cautious and restrained demeanor--always observing and seeking to learn--does much to promote meaningful interaction. Recognizing the long-standing, tradition-bound nature of SCE cultures assists.

Harmony then comes in possessing a nonjudgmental frame of mind. Such restraint helps avoid actions which are shocking or insulting.

3. Wholehearted Effort

Adeptness at cross cultural communication comes only through dedicated observation, travel, study and concentrated energy. Often, what must take place cannot be learned from reading military manuals.

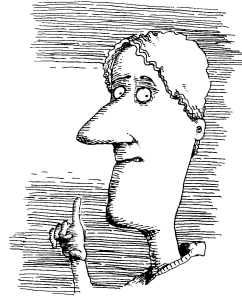


Says Captain Ross Coffman, when commander of F Troop, 2d squadron, 2nd Armored Cavalry Regiment, while stationed at Camp Dobol, some 25 miles southeast of Tuzla, Bosnia and Herzegovina, "what we need to do here is observe, and observe some more. See what's going on and say, 'Is this a police matter or is this a military

matter?' You have to be aware of everything that's going on. And although you're restrained, you maintain an iron fist that you keep in your pocket." (Army Times, 17 Nov 1997, p. 15).

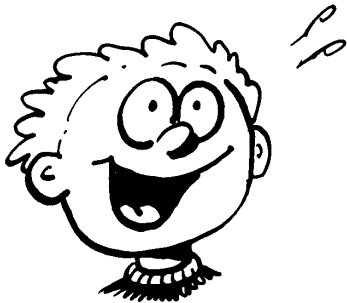
Or, as T.E. Lawrence wrote in a past generation,

"Your success will be just proportioned to the amount of mental effort you devote to it."



4. The "Ultimate Gesture" Business advisor Roger Axtell, in his book Gestures, The Do's and Taboos of Body Language Around the World, describes this universal symbol. Called the "ultimate gesture," it is rarely misunderstood, releases positive energy, and assists in the most complicated of situations.

"What is this singular signal, this miracle [manner], this giant of all gestures?



It is, quite simply, the smile.

Use it freely. Use it often." (p. 113.)

II. Overall Attitudes

The following general principles apply when dealing with peoples of Central/South Central Europe.

1. Recognize Long-standing Traditions In SCE, "past history is closely linked with perceptions of the present and future" (Bosnia Country Handbook, p. 4-1). For many SCE peoples, the events of the distant and recent past, combined with legend and myth, strongly affect their current worldview. Many within the population see daily events only through the shaded perspective of these past experiences.

2. Practice Civility and Respect Speaking of his mission within Bosnia, Company Commander Coffman emphasized the needed dimension of consideration and good will so necessary in forces deployed on the United Nation's Stabilization Force mission.

"Ordinarily, because we're all 'Type A' personalities, the first thing an American soldier does is charge into a situation...We take the objective, move to the screenline. Whatever.

I've changed [in Bosnia] in the fact that I try to observe the situation to find out what's going on...I apply the customs, the history of this area and respond from there." (Army Times, 17 Nov 1997, p. 15).

3. Show Kindness



Most cultures generously accept people who show consideration of others, who maintain fairness in clarifying their views, and who model a tolerant approach which seeks peace.

4. Be Sincere A kind, honest, humble approach--free of an arrogant and overbearing attitude--naturally

opens the way for agreeable exchanges. Writes Dr. Nydell,



"Foreigners are forgiven a great deal--even conservative people make allowances, particularly when they know your motives are good. The essential thing is to make a sincere, well-meaning effort to adapt and understand."
(Understanding Arabs, p. 112.)

III. Manners and Customs of the Balkan Region

1. Religious Issues Chaplain (MAJ) Robert Harms, in his paper entitled "A Commander's Guide to the Impact of Indigenous Religions on Operations in Bosnia-Herzegovina," discusses implications of religion on military operations in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In dealing with the complex indigenous religious situation, Chaplain Harms suggests the following.

a. Respect indigenous practice *"Do not presume to understand the religious aspects of the struggle based upon some prior knowledge of Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, or Islam. 'Balkanization' changed the rules. Get to know these religious as they are believed and practiced by the Croats, the Serbs and the Bosniaks."*



b. Avoid polarized thinking *"Do not think in terms of 'good guys' and 'bad guys.'" U.S. forces are likely to be fired upon by either side. By the same*

token, there are people within each of the three groups who are tired of the fighting and would genuinely like to see a peaceful resolution to the conflict."

Dr. William Johnsen, Associate Research Professor of National Security Affairs of the U.S. Army War College, points to the complexities of the region when he discusses the following "melange of wars" which recently took place within the region. Dr. Johnsen identifies "interstate wars of aggression, limited vs. total war, civil wars, ethnic and religious conflict, personal power struggles, battles to retain fiefdoms and individual psychopaths attracted to war."

Sensitivity and breadth of perspective, rather than polarized, either/or "good guys vs. bad guys" thought, becomes important.

c. Guard against ethnocentric bias "Do not expect people in the area to respond to you in accordance with 'American' moral, religious, or ethical standards. Do not expect people to act in accordance with adages such as 'the Golden Rule,' 'live and let live,' or 'forgive and forget.'"



d. Avoid religious disputes As stated in the U.S. Department of Defense Bosnia Country Handbook, "Religious animosity among the three major denominations, Eastern Orthodox Christian, Roman Catholic, and Islam, remains a divisive cultural factor" (p. 4-6). Entering into religious arguments with the local population too readily resurfaces and fuels these hostilities.

e. Respect the role of history, tradition and legend Accounts such as Balkan Ghosts by Robert Kaplan or novelist Rebecca West's Black Lamb and Grey

Falcon explore in depth the impact of history on the present.

One of the key judgments Dr. Johnsen identifies as important to assist decision making in the region is:

"The past is always present in the Balkans and defines the future...Centuries of history and myths shape daily events...Policy makers must understand the biases and importance of these influences..." (p. 3).



Due to this long-standing history, Chaplain Harms elaborates,

"Show proper respect for religious buildings, places of worship, monuments, tombs, and graveyards. Their damage or destruction is much more likely to evoke an emotional response than a rational response."

f. Realize religion's importance

"Never underestimate the power of religion as a source of motivation and inspiration--for better or for worse. Try to maintain, and to instill in subordinates, a sensitivity which promotes peace and understanding wherever possible."

Dr. Johnsen continues, "One should not minimize the depths of religious animosity in the Balkans...Western analysts must comprehend the importance of the religious component of ethnic identity...the religious overtones of the ongoing civil war in the former Yugoslavia--to include the broader influences of the Islamic world--cannot be ignored" (p. 40).

2. Overall perspectives

a. Friends and home hospitality

Drawing from an older clan society cultural heritage, family and friends take precedence. Networking through personal contacts, friends and family members is a primary means of getting things done. The establishment of trust, so often betrayed in the Communist era, comes most readily with those familiar faces whom one knows.



First name informality, a common American custom, may make many in the region feel uncomfortable if done only in a passing, curt fashion.

Hospitality surrounds the midday lunch which is the biggest meal of the day. Animated discussion, music and singing can be a part of such gatherings.

b. Language Seen by some as the soul of a nation, language takes on increasing importance with the many ethnic groups within SCE. Writes SFC John Andruszka, who recently returned from a Bosnian mission, linguists must take care to recognize this critical source of ethnic identity.

"As each of the former warring ethnic groups attempt to find their own identity, they seemed to be adapting the language into different dialects. We found the language was changing and evolving among the Bosnian Croats, the Bosnian Serbs, and the Bosnian Muslims while we were there. We were not really exposed to this aspect in training and had to be careful about which ethnic area we were in when using certain phrases." ("Serbian-Croatian linguist shares training, field experiences from Bosnia," Globe, Nov 1997, p. 11).

c. Blame Yale Richmond, in his helpful book From Da to Yes, identifies the tendency, within countries in transition, of blaming others for present and past misfortunes.



Centuries of foreign rule and the imposition of Communist ideology on much of the region contributes, in part, to this condition. The biggest culprit is the former Communist system. Often minority groups or neighboring nations receive the main impact of this reproach.

d. Violence While not inescapable, "violence has been and will likely continue to be, prevalent" in the region (Bosnia Country Handbook, p. 4-1). Dr. Johnsen, in a perspective held by many analysts, goes so far as to say "violence is ingrained in the cultures of the region...an accepted agent of change...for over two millennia, the Balkans not only has been the major battleground among competing Greek, Roman, Byzantine, Ottoman, and Habsburg empires, but also the killing ground for World War I, World War II, and numerous civil wars" (p. 28).

e. Mindset "Compromise represents weakness. Many inhabitants of the region think in 'zero sum game terms;' importantly, frequently in the past defeat has meant death...the various cultures are exclusive in nature. If an individual does not display all necessary prerequisites, i.e., language, religion, and ethnic origin, he or she is excluded from membership...



there appears to be no room for compromise...an 'us versus them' cultural mentality exists and, given the rising levels of violence, is not likely to change in the near future."

("Deciphering the Balkan Enigma: Using History to Inform Policy" by Dr. William Johnsen, pp. 3, 28).

In addition, Dr. Johnsen discusses the mindset difference used in SCE when considering logic patterns. *"Analysts...should not assume that Balkan politicians follow Western European or American logic. This is not to imply that Balkan leaders are irrational, but to point out that they have different historical biases and values that may drive an entirely different thought process."*

What may look irrational to a Western interlocutor may be absolutely credible in the eyes of a Balkan leader or his followers." (p. 39).

3. Greetings

a. Handshakes Throughout the region, firm handshakes, often repeated during the same occasions, occur. Older or more ranking personnel receive the handshake first. When greeting a woman, the man waits for the woman to extend her hand. Good eye contact with the person to whom you are speaking enhances communication.



b. Gifts Often, small gifts or flowers are appropriate when visiting someone's home.

4. Gestures The following information, adapted from Gestures--their origins and distribution by Desmond Morris, is instructive. Based upon social science research conducted between 1975-1977, meanings of the following gestures apply to the Dubrovnik region of the former Yugoslavia.

- **Fingertips kiss** (fingertips and thumb of right hand pressed to lips, with hand then lightly tossed forward) = praise.
- **Nose thumb** (thumb on nose with fingers spread like a fan) = mockery.

- **Hand purse** (fingers and thumb brought together facing upwards) = much or lots.
- **Eyelid pull** (forefinger pulls skin on the bottom of the eye downwards) = I am alert.
- **Forearm jerk** (clenched fist jerked upwards with other hand slapping near elbow) = sexual insult.
- **Flat hand flick** (right hand, facing upward, is flicked slightly up with extended left hand stopping action) = I'm leaving.
- **Ring** (thumb and forefinger touching in a circle) = OK, good, though some may consider it insulting.
- **Horn** (forefinger and little finger extended Texas Aggie style) = general insult.
- **Chin flick** (back of fingers flick forward against underside of chin) = general disinterest.
- **Thumb up** = OK
- **Palm back "V" sign** (like power salute with "V") = victory. Sometimes, with knuckles outward, the gesture means strong anger.
- **Index finger beckon** (curling motion, palm up) = used to signal animals.



5. Additional Customs and Courtesies

a. Rowdy/boorish behavior Arrogant attitudes can easily inhibit communication. In public, loud and boisterous talk needlessly offends. The general population often considers stretching, yawning or cracking knuckles as rude.



b. Photographs Ask permission before taking photos of people or pets.

c. Women Staring at, whistling to or making eye contact unnecessarily with women can be offensive.

d. Souvenirs Leave remains from the recent conflict (shrapnel, bullet casings, debris from destroyed buildings) in place.

e. Muslim particularities The following may apply to Bosniak peoples or other Muslims within the region.

- **Gift giving** Due to the feeling that if given a gift, one of equal value must be returned, avoid giving expensive gifts.
- **Hospitality** Accept the graciousness of your Muslim host.
- **Left hand** Use sparingly in the presence of Muslims.
- **Pornography, pork and alcohol** Though not as rigid as other Islamic communities, Bosnian Muslims may frown upon such practices.

f. Driving practice If you must drive, do so defensively. *"Traffic is chaotic, fast, reckless, and incompatible with the narrow, poorly-surfaced streets and roads common throughout"* the region (Country Profile of Slovenia, SAIC, 30 May 1997, p. 41).



g. Media As Americans, we are accustomed to the truthfulness of the evening news. Though a bias and perspective may differ depending on which news source reports, we do not question the veracity of the facts presented. Within the Bosnia and Herzegovina region, such objectivity and factual reporting may not be the standard practice. News agencies--whether based in Zagreb, Sarajevo or Belgrade--can slant, distort or invent the "truth" as they see fitting. Military linguists should be especially sensitive to such unbalanced reporting.



"Never be afraid to try."

Review Quiz: Gestures and Taboos

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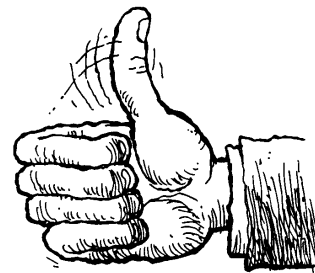


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Part 1--True or False Place a T or an F in the blank provided.



1. _____ According to Lt. Gen. Pagonis, chief of Logistics during Desert Storm, soldiers, sailors, airmen, and Marines showed sensitive and knowledgeable cross-cultural abilities while deployed during the recent Middle East conflict.
2. _____ Impulsive, up-front, let-it-all-hang-out behavior contributes to good cross-cultural interaction.
3. _____ Establishing solid relations with friends from other cultures comes by treating individuals as if they were entering our living rooms--dispensing courtesy and grace all along.
4. _____ Most cultures generously accept people who show a consideration of others.
5. _____ Orthodoxy, Catholicism and Islam, in the Balkans, contains practices and beliefs unique to the region.
6. _____ "Good guy/bad guy" polarized thinking is good for peace-keepers to practice in the Balkans.
7. _____ Many SCE peoples regularly seek to practice a "golden rule," "live and let live," "forgive and forget," perspective toward life.
8. _____ First name informality, done casually and quickly, is a good practice to employ in SCE.
9. _____ What is often irrational and illogical to many Westerners is likewise irrational for many SCE leaders and their followers.
10. _____ The horn gesture (forefinger and little finger extended) is a good greeting to employ in SCE.

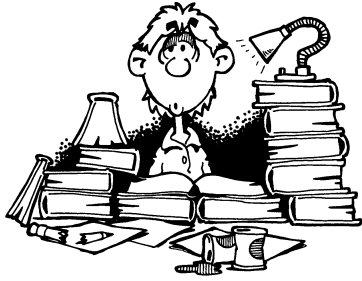


Part 2--Multiple Choice Place the letter of the most correct response in the blank provided.

1. _____ The concept of face connotes
 - a. the picture of a person in a mirror.
 - b. avoidance of embarrassment, failure, defeat or contradiction.
 - c. new vistas for personal understanding.
2. _____ What traits are necessary to establish strong alliances with people of other cultures?
 - a. Assertive assurance and domineering confidence
 - b. Wholehearted effort and unremitting study
 - c. Apologetic attitudes and condescending outlooks
3. _____ According to Cpt. Ron Coffman, a company commander stationed in Bosnia during NOV. 1997, one of the greatest missions soldiers perform currently in Bosnia is
 - a. Expert Infantry Badge qualification.
 - b. expert rifleman competition.
 - c. observation.
4. _____ Within SCE past history
 - a. plays a small role in present issues- "today is today."
 - b. is clearly linked with present and future.
 - c. influences clerics and educators but remains distant from the common population.
5. _____ Religious buildings, places of worship monuments, tombs, and graveyards in SCE
 - a. possess little sentimental attachment for most people.
 - b. carry great emotional significance for many people.
 - c. were the last structures to be rebuilt after the war.

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6. _____ For many SCE peoples, languages, as the soul of a nation
- a. takes on an increasingly distinct importance as the nations of SCE develop.
 - b. remains static and unchanging due to rigid educational practices.
 - c. in practice contains little dialect or regional variation throughout the region.
7. _____ Concerning the "mindset" of many within the SCE region, what adage best applies?
- a. "Live and let live...today is today."
 - b. "Compromise represents weakness...us versus them."
 - c. "The squeaky wheel gets the grease."
8. _____ Rowdy, boorish behavior by Americans--with loud, boisterous talk in public
- a. promotes good communication with Serbs and Croats.
 - b. can needlessly offend.
 - c. promotes casual, informal dialogue and discussion.
9. _____ War souvenirs and mementos from the recent conflict are best
- a. taken home to America as tangible symbols of the IFOR participation.
 - b. left where they lie.
 - c. buried or taken to local regional recycling centers.
10. _____ Use of pornography, pork and alcohol by Bosniak (Bosnian Muslims) people is
- a. unofficially tolerated by many.
 - b. strictly prohibited in accordance with Qur'an guidance.
 - c. limited to only a small, small percentage of the people.



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Resources for Further Study-- Gestures and Taboos

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Cutter, Natela. "Serbian opposition maintains pressure." UPI release, 6 Dec 1996.

Fisher, Ian. "U.S. General Has Talks on Bosnian Accord." New York Times, 28 Dec 1995, p. A6.

General Nash responds to controversy raised by hard talk by Col Greg Fontenot on initial entry of U.S. Armed Forces into Bosnia.

Hedges, Chris. "Cynics in Their 20's, Bred in the Balkan Inferno." New York Times, 30 Dec 1997, p. A4.

Review of a recent novel by 26-year-old Vladimir Jokanovic, a medical student who fled Croatia during the war and now lives in Novi Sad, Serbia. Article describes the alienation experienced by the current young ("the doomed generation") due to results of the recent conflict in the region.

Hedges, Chris. "To Wash Down the Serbian Autumn, Plum Brandy." New York Times, 31 Oct 1997.

Discussion of festive fall interaction of rural Serbs.

O'Connor, Mike. "Case Study Shows Why Bosnians Shun Banks." New York Times, 5 April 1998, p. A9.

Account of why Bosnian peoples distrust their banks.

OSCE Election Observation Mission. "Preliminary Report, Presidential and Parliamentary Elections, Republic of Serbia," 21 Sept 1997.

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Public Enterprise Radio Television of Serbia, Government of Serbia and political parties in 1997 election. "Agreement for principles applying to elections to be held 21 Sept 1997.

Ricks, Thomas E. "In Bosnia, Will It Help to Have Tamed the Wild West?" Wall Street Journal, 27 Dec 1995, p. 7.

Controversial report of initial entry into Bosnia by U.S. Armed Forces. Hard-talking Colonel Greg Fontenot, commander of the Posavina Corridor, is quoted as saying, "They don't think I trust them--and they're right...These are people who kill women and children and attack their neighbors. They're offended by me?...I'm offended that I had to come here because of all their fighting."



"Life on the battlefield is short for the unprepared..."
General Edward C. Meyer

